

JAN 23 1924

THE WILSON BULLETIN

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ORNITHOLOGY

VOL. XXXV

DECEMBER, 1923

NO. 4

OLD SERIES VOL. XXXV. NEW SERIES VOL. XXX.

NOTES ON THE NESTING OF THE WILSON'S SNIPE IN CRAWFORD COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

BY GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON

It is thought by the writer that there is no published account of the nesting of Wilson's Snipe (*Gallinago delicata*) in western Pennsylvania; and even if there be such an account, the notes offered in this paper may prove interesting, particularly to the students of our own region,—many of whom, it is certain, are not aware that the bird nests with us.

The writer well knows that in disclosing the nesting grounds of this species, he exposes the whole region to the mercies of collectors who may have a set of eggs of this species as a particular local desideratum; but he also feels that sincere ornithologists will delight in knowing of such a region, and will do all in their power not only to protect the Snipe and other birds, but possibly to set aside the area as a State Preserve.

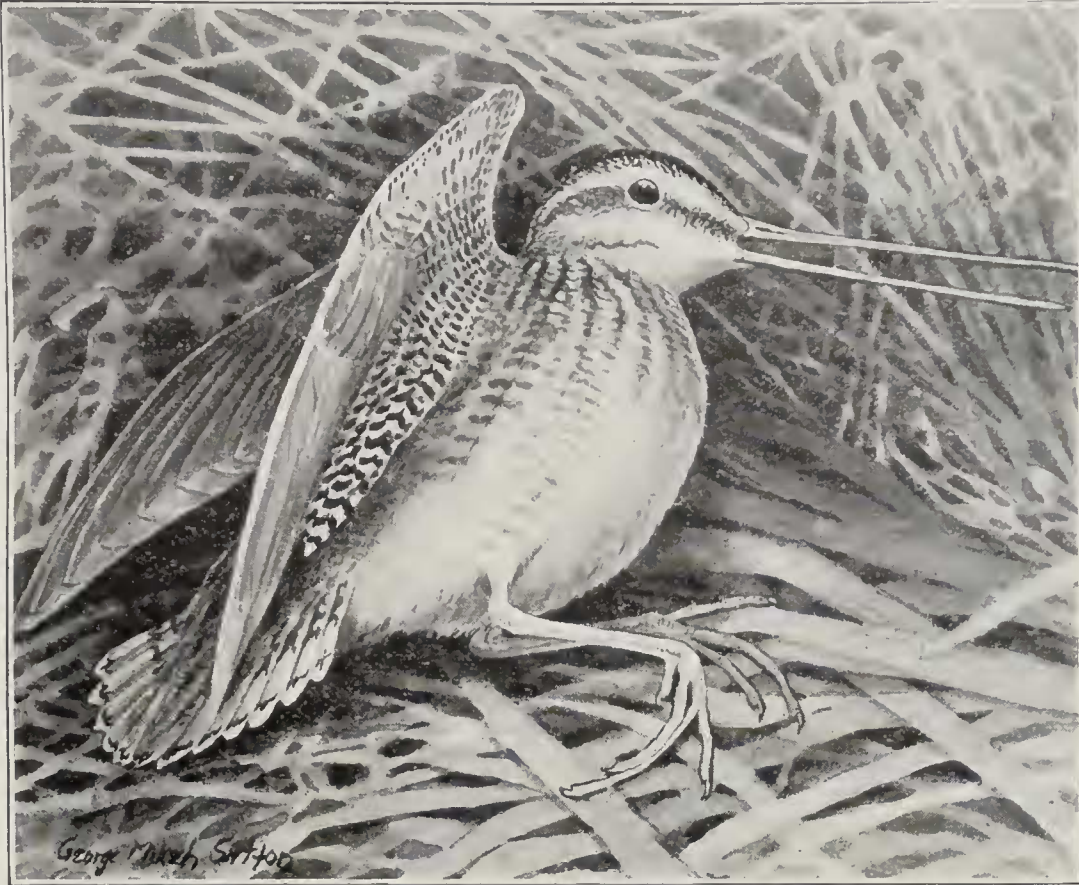
From April 27 to June 3, 1922, Pymatuning Swamp was the scene of the Carnegie Museum's field-labors for the spring season. This swamp is located in the Linesville Quadrant of Crawford County, but my base of operation was Hartstown, a small village about a mile north of the southern extremity of the swamp. From my quarters in this town it was possible to plunge almost immediately into the swamp proper, and many interesting birds nested not at all far from the railway station.

Although the tamarack and hemlock wooded regions are most interesting, and well worth a prolonged discussion from the ornithologist's standpoint, in this particular paper only the more open stretches of the swamp, or marsh-lands, will be considered, since here, and here only, occurred the Wilson's Snipe. During the early part of our sojourn, from April 27 to May 2, the weather was pronouncedly chilly; and Tree Sparrows were still more or less abundant. Nevertheless, on the first evening of our visit, numbers of Snipes were present, and many, if not all of them "bleating."

This wierdly beautiful sound is difficult to describe. Nor have I yet found a word which very aptly suggests the quality of the noise. "Bleating" it has often been called; also "whistling," "winnowing," and even "whimneying," all of which are in a way suggestive, but only incompletely so. While on the very scene, I spent some time trying to speak my impressions in a word, and I was a trifle disturbed by my total inability to find any means of doing so. There is a certain attendant sense of despair in finding oneself so helpless. Although this sound has some qualities of a bleat, I should say that the beginning of the wind song is too gradual, and the dying out too much prolonged to be given by this term. A bleat, as a usual thing, at least begins rather suddenly. The immature Black-backed Gull, for example, often gives forth a sound very appropriately to be called a bleat, which the natives of Labrador are pleased to term "bawling."

I must confess that there is for me in the Wilson's Snipe's courting song, a sobbing sound; and when thus described it brings to my mind the most satisfying tonal image of all. But perhaps the difficult matter of interpretation of sound had better be dismissed by saying that to be conceived properly it must first be heard. For a time I could not correlate the time of the song accurately with the wing beats of the bird. Always the rapid wing movements seemed to precede all the sound, and as nearly as I could tell, the bodily performance of the bird was over more or less, before the sound reached me. This was due, I believe, largely to the distance between me and the birds. For, after becoming somewhat desperate, I waded out to the middle of the marsh where, waist-deep in water, and with tall, dead cat-tails about my body, I could watch the birds to better advantage. A few yards above my new observation point would occasionally fly a performing Snipe. And thrilling it was to feel so intimately associated with things, particularly at that intimate time of the evening, when the whole marsh seemed to be in action. While a performing Snipe was flying over me I was conscious of a gentle, but distinct, vibration, such as I have heard at pipe-organ recitals. I did not realize this at first, because it was a delicate sensation. But I always felt it; and once or twice I actually seemed to feel some sort of vibration before any sound reached my ears. At least twice the bills of birds which performed above me were apparently opened some-

what; why, I cannot say, because I firmly believe that these courting songs have no vocal connections. During the producing of the sound, full powers of flight were not maintained for the bird practically always sank to a lower plane during the process.



Female Wilson's Snipe feigning crippledness. (No. 1).
(Drawing made from life sketches, by George Miksch Sutton.)

Rarely I heard suggestions of slight vocal twitterings similar to those of the Woodcock, but ordinarily their voices were not heard.

During the first part of May these aerial flights were observed daily, and, off and on, at any time. But the only really concerted movements were in the evening. Often while I was skinning birds, as late as midnight, the Snipes would still be sobbing out on the marshes. In the early morning they were not often heard, this period seeming to be devoted to searching for food. But during the day at least two or three birds, if not more, were heard constantly, and, if, the sky became overcast, one by one, up from the cat-tails went all the Snipes to join the usual twilight concert. The birds flew about in wide circles. By following one

individual it was ascertained that circles almost a half mile in diameter were sometimes described, although this was not usually the case. Later in the season, presumably when certain pairs of birds had left for regions further north, the air routes of the flying birds were much more confined, indicating, it seems to me, that attention was plainly focused on an objective point below. I wonder if it is certainly known that the female Snipes never indulge in these antics. The question naturally arises, because when first the Snipes were heard, in full evening concert, it was practically impossible to find a single Snipe anywhere on the ground. Never was one flushed at such times, that did not, after emitting a nervous "schkape" or two, circle higher, and join the performers. It is highly probable, in this connection, that the incubating females of the region actually were not flushed, simply because their nests were not closely enough approached; but concerning the female Snipes which were en route to more northern nesting grounds, I cannot say. These may have joined the males occasionally, if not regularly, in the flight antics.

This last statement, implying as it does, a wide difference in the nesting dates of individual pairs of Snipes, leads me to a discussion of the status of the species. Normally it has been considered of course only a migrant. Now, it must be regarded also as a summer resident, and furthermore, numerous records tend to show that it is not especially rare as a winter resident, depending of course on the weather conditions. The inhabitants of Hartstown spoke of seeing Snipes occasionally in winter as though it were no unusual thing; even so recently as in December of 1922, Wilson's Snipe was included in the Christmas Census from Mercer County; and two accurate observers have informed me that this species sometimes remains in small flocks. Thus, it is to be expected that the wintering individuals have progressed far in their nesting activities by the time the migrants from further south are passing through. This explains why the courtship flight movements were still very evident and constant when a week later, well incubated eggs were found. Some queer antics which were observed are still not satisfactorily explained to my mind however. On April 29 two birds were repeatedly flushed together; not always the same two individuals necessarily, I presume, and not certainly of opposite sex. But these birds often sailed gracefully over the cat-tails, in wide sweeping undulations, with wings set in a manner suggesting Chimney

Swifts, a type of flight totally different from any previously observed. The same stunt was many times observed in the male bird of the pair whose nest was located. In fact this type of display, if it were display, was so common that the usual twitching, erratic flight was only rarely seen. I have wondered if this may not have been a pair of birds, possibly recently mated, though not actually nesting there.

On May 3, in a portion of the swamp near town, a new antic was observed. A Snipe, subsequently determined as a male, sprang up close at hand, and after a few energetic, direct wingbeats, put his wings high above his body, and describing a graceful arc, dropped toward the ground, his legs trailing, only to rise again to repeat the performance. Never during this exhibition did he actually touch the ground with his feet, so far as I could see, but it gave that impression. He was clearly excited, and I now know that such antics are a certain indication of nesting activity. At such times the male gave forth several short notes which may accurately be termed "bleats." Occasionally the bird, after performing this novel antic would drop to the grass some distance away, and then fly up after a time, considerably nearer me, making it evident that he was attempting to lure me away. Then again, after trying these antics for a time, he would suddenly mount to the sky, and there would follow a season of the wierd wind music — always delightful.

Much time was spent in searching for a nest, and on account of failure to find even any certain indication of breeding, I was at the point of deciding that all these birds were simply passing through, and courting as they progressed. Again and again Snipes flushed almost under foot, and often their flushing was so hesitant, and so varied with antics that the area whence they sprang was literally combed before search was abandoned. The birds seemed particularly abundant in a treacherous waste stretch which had been burned over, the previous fall, and here, it seemed, a great percentage of the courtship was taking place. It was found later that one pair actually did nest here, at the edge of the burned area, but the first nest located was in the middle of the principal cat-tail marsh where the dried blades stuck up in confusion everywhere.

On May 4, while watching nest-building operations of a seclusive Swamp Sparrow there was occasion to tramp about a great deal in the cat-tails. Walking, or perhaps a better word,

progress, was difficult, because the depth of the water varied greatly, and it was impossible to tell from the surface just how far down the next step would take one. It was no unusual thing for the water to go over my hip-boot tops. As is usually the case, at least in my experience, the female bird flushed at a time when all thoughts of a Snipe's nest were for the time being abandoned. She left not in a great hurry, and in doing so,



Nest of Wilson's Snipe. (No.2).

(Photograph by Norman McClintock.)

leaped straight into the air about three feet above her nest, whence, with legs dangling, tail wide-spread, and wings nervously jerking, she gradually let herself down to the ground about twenty feet away. For an instant, as she quivered above her eggs it seemed that she was considering returning to them, instead of leaving. I was within a few feet of the nest and as she left I could see plainly that she was looking at me. After she settled in the cat-tails I could scarcely see her, but I know that she was moving but little, and there was practically no demonstration. The male bird, however, came near, and almost

outdid himself in the matter of protests. Not only did he rise repeatedly into the air, to descend on set wings stiffly arched above his back, but he called constantly in a most agitated tone. These notes I had never heard before. After I had taken some measurements regarding the nest, and collected some surrounding material, the male bird flew to the sky, where in wide circles above me he indulged in the strange wailing-laugh.

The nest was beautifully situated in the center of a clump of dried fern stalks—a clump similar to hundreds of just such little islands near at hand, but certainly admirably suited to such a nesting site, for the eggs were almost completely surrounded at the short distance of four inches by a paling of dead fern stalks. The eggs were about nine inches above water at this time although the water's depth changed constantly with every rainfall, and five days later the outer rim of the nest was only two inches above water level. I wondered at the time of finding the nest what the young Snipe did when hatched, surrounded as they were by water several inches deep. But I have learned since then that young Snipe are not averse to deep water, and seem to negotiate it without difficulty. The eggs in this nest were far advanced in incubation. They would probably have hatched within a week. Thus I realized that if other nests were not found very soon, our chances of seeing more Wilson's Snipe eggs were very few.

From May 6 on Snipes were seen daily. Sometimes several of them were flushed from a likely nesting area, but never did their actions suggest flushing from a nest, or even anxiety concerning it. I judged, therefore, that these were mainly migrating birds pausing on their northern journey for a few days. This supposition proved correct, for after the tenth of May, Snipes were not often seen, and when they were observed their actions always indicated a nest nearby.

At least twice during the period after finding this first nest, I saw a male bird standing on the ground near me,—a rather unusual thing, since they were not as a rule seen until flushed. In both instances, the bird was very much squatted, and, judging from the apparent tension of his body, ready to spring into air at any instant.

On May 17 further proof was found that the Wilson's Snipe is a nester in Pymatuning Swamp. In a very small marshy area—scarcely a rod square,—lying in an open field near the cat-tail

swamp, I flushed a female Snipe, which threw herself about so frantically that I knew at once there were eggs or young. A brief search revealed two of the young birds, fairly well developed, but still in the down. The mother's antics so claimed my attention that I did not keep close enough watch of the young, and eventually was unable to find them. I hesitated to tramp about much at the time for fear of stepping upon them. The mother bird grunted and clucked incessantly and fell upon her side uttering wierd cries, and beating her wings pitiably. At times she would dart into the air and circle about in great haste, very close to me, and alight in the tall grass, whence she would run gracefully away until she was again plainly in view. As she ran about her head was held rather stiffly, and it seemed that moving it from side to side much caused her inconvenience. In fact, once or twice, a definite impression was given that she was carrying something in her mouth, her head was held at such a strained angle. I have always regretted that it was necessary to leave this little domestic scene, without further observance of the little ones, but I was called away, and never saw any of those birds again. I marvelled at the time that so small a patch of tall grass should have been selected as a nesting site. Experience since then has taught me that this area was not, indeed, the nesting site, but a feeding or refuge ground to which the mother had led the young as soon as they were strong enough to follow her. The actual nesting grounds were restricted to the larger marshes.

On May 15, 1923, I resumed field operations at the swamp, and within a few hours after arrival had located a Wilson's Snipe nest (No. 2), in exactly the same section of the swamp as that where the 1922 nest with eggs was found. The female bird left rather quietly and made no protest. She was heard calling softly among the distant cat-tails, however, and by the increase in the volume of the sound, I could tell she was coming nearer. This nest was built upon a bit of decayed, sunken log and was composed entirely of grass stems rather carefully laid together. The eggs were but a few inches above the surface of the water, and although grass stems connected the nesting site with other vegetation the nest was virtually on an island surrounded by water eighteen inches deep. The water-level, by the way, was at this time, unusually low, being fully fifteen inches lower than it had been the year before on the same date,

so that it was now possible to walk about a large area of the swamp without boots at all. The Snipes, however, built their nests only in the submerged areas, probably for protection. The eggs in this nest were not placed, as I had expected to find them, with all smaller ends toward the middle, but, as is shown in the photograph of Nest No. 3, with three small ends pointed in the same direction, and the remaining egg with its small end so inserted as to allow the set to occupy the smallest possible space. These eggs were not as much incubated as the set found on May 4, 1922, indicating either that this season was very much retarded, generally speaking, or that the present pair were migrants whose nesting operations necessarily started later than those of the permanent resident birds. On May 16, another nest (No. 3), with four eggs was found but a short distance from the first nest referred to. The eggs in this nest were even closer to the water level, and certain it is, that if there had been a day's steady rain, this and several other nests would have been submerged. The female bird at this nest was quite solicitous, and fell upon a clump of ferns beating her wings wildly. The eggs had been incubated not more than a week; the set was a particularly beautiful one, with heavy, handsome markings. Judging from the arrangement of the grass stems I should say that this nest either had been built up directly out of the water, or that the water level had recently been raised — which latter supposition is scarcely plausible since there had been no rain of any consequence for weeks. On May 17, Mr. Norman McClintock, who was with me, found yet another nest (No. 4) about a quarter of a mile from the two already located, which was situated in an unusual position. This nest was the only Snipe nest I have seen which had any real protection from above. The nest was so placed under a dead willow branch and some leaning cat-tail stalks, that it was really difficult to see it. The grasses composing the nest had been placed with care, and were somewhat woven about the cat-tail stalks and other grasses standing near. Mr. McClintock stated, when he reported the nest to me, that there were but three eggs in the nest. I was rather surprised at this. But when I observed the nest personally, I found an egg floating in the water a few inches from it; the female had kicked the egg out when she flushed. These eggs were already hatching, and although the young birds were inside the eggs, their fine, penetrating notes could be heard when

I was standing some distance away. While we watched this nest, which, by the way, was closer to the willow growth than any so far located, the female (?) bird flew rapidly by several times, but did not make a vocal noise or give further protest. I had the privilege of watching this bird on her nest for some time. The water near at hand was very shallow.

During these few days of observation, when Snipe nests were being located so constantly, I marvelled at the scarcity of the birds themselves. There was occasional evidence of courtship flights, and at night the wierd calling was often heard, but the Snipes were not often seen — not nearly so commonly at least as they were in 1922. This has led me to believe that during the previous year there may have been an abundant nesting Snipe population in some section of the swamp which we did not thoroughly enough investigate. And certain it was, that in a wide burnt-over area, during the previous year, numbers of courting Snipes were observed, where it was later impossible to spend much time searching for nests.

On May 29, with Messrs. Semple and Christy of Sewickley, I again visited the swamp, and had the good fortune to locate yet another nest a few hours after arrival at the nesting grounds. It was fast becoming dark and as I was wading hurriedly through tall cat-tails in an unfamiliar section of the marsh, I heard a significant flutter of wings near my feet. A brief investigation revealed the nest, again surrounded by water, and built into the debris that had collected about last year's cat-tail stalks. As I looked I felt certain that there were but two eggs, and I was wondering at the reason for an incomplete set so late in the season, when I realized that a dark portion of the nest was not a shadow, but a downy young bird, and in the water near-by floated another, so young and weak that he scarcely knew what was wrong, and less about how to improve conditions; he had been kicked out of the nest by the mother bird as she left. I picked the little creature out of the water: he floated very bonyantly, and was not at all wet. As he stood in my hand, with head drawn in, and bill not yet at all out of proportion as in the adult bird, I noticed the richness of his deep brown coloration, and the beauty and delicacy of the darker clonding and fine buffy spotting. When put back in the nest, I was relieved to find that he settled down peaceably. I had almost expected him to bolt off among the cat-tails. When I

family are mannerisms as distinct as among the woodpecker. was but a short distance away the female returned. I could hear her running through the water as she approached the nest.

On this evening the flight song of the male was again carefully observed, and it was determined that the whole performance ran rather imperfectly through at least six notes of the scale.



Nest of Wilson's Snipe (No. 3) showing surrounding water.

(Photograph by Norman McClintock.)

By imperfectly, I mean that the true notes were not given, there being always a tendency to a flat or sharp. I also rather satisfactorily compared the quality of the notes to the sound produced by blowing into a bottle or lead pipe. In some ways I think this is the best comparison yet made. The tones were primarily windy.

On the following day, which was the last on which Snipes were observed, an interesting thing happened. As we stood alongside the tracks, near the station at Hartstown, I noticed a Snipe circling low through the thickest of the smoke from the engine, and directly afterward hardly without any reason at

all, my eye fell upon a bit of dark brown near the rail on the nearby track,—a baby Wilson's Snipe. I picked it up in haste, and no sooner had done so than another little one appeared miraculously from under the huge, roaring train, and made straight for me. These little Snipes were well developed, and it was difficult to hold them delicately in my hands because they kicked so. I put them down by a little pool nearby, and I saw the mother join them shortly. By crawling carefully to the edge of the embankment I watched her run to the young ones and cover them. Upon seeing me she walked over them, and eventually led them into the higher grasses and weeds at the end of the pool.

Altogether it would seem from the above notes, that the Wilson's Snipe is a regular, fairly common breeder in the swampy areas of the northwestern part of Pennsylvania, and it should reasonably be expected to occur in the marshes similar to the cat-tail areas at Pymatuning throughout Erie, Warren, Crawford, Mercer, and northern Lawrence counties.

SOME BIRDS OF THE OZARK REGION

BY JOHNSON A. NEFF

When you read or hear anything derogatory to the Ozark region of Missouri and Arkansas do not let yourself be fooled into thinking that this region, famous in the comic columns of the daily papers, does not have its share of nature and especially of birds. Having lived all of my as yet rather short life in the Missouri Ozarks I admit a highly developed prejudice. I would not retract whatever I might say about the Ozarks for any cause whatever.

Since I made my advent onto the farm at the age of five I have always studied birds. As usual with most youngsters, much of my most interesting data was lost because I failed to keep dates and other interesting data. And now in the later years I must admit a lack of care and a lack of completeness and thoroughness in bird study, which has come from the necessity of making my study of birds a spare time pleasure, when spare time always seems to come at times when the birds are a minus quantity. For some time past, and for a year to come, I have been a student in the Missouri Agricultural College which has kept me out of the Ozark region for nine to ten months per year.